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ABSTRACT

Virtual teaming has come to stay in the fast developing world of communication as it brings more value to customers, saves costs, accelerates competence, and leverages organizational learning. Therefore, students need to be educated about this new type of team and the tools that are available to facilitate communication and to enhance productivity. This article explains a simulation that will allow students to communicate in virtual teams to solve a murder mystery. It provides a framework that enables a professor to quickly adapt the exercise for his or her particular needs. Students will benefit by learning how to work with other virtual teams without having face-to-face meetings. As more and more companies move to the virtual organization, students need to be prepared to communicate in this type of work setting. An appendix offers instructions to share with the class. (Author/RS)

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Colonel Mustard in the Library With the Knife . . .Experiencing Virtual Teaming

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Abstract

Virtual teaming has come to stay in the fast developing world of communication as it brings more value to customers, saves costs, accelerates competence, and leverages organizational learning. Therefore, students need to be educated about this new type of team and the tools that are available to facilitate communication and to enhance productivity. This article explains a simulation that will allow students to communicate in virtual teams to solve a murder mystery. It provides a framework that enables a professor to quickly adapt the exercise for his or her particular needs. Students will benefit by learning how to work with other virtual teams without having face-to-face meetings. As more and more companies move to the virtual organization, students need to be prepared to communicate in this type of work setting.

Key Words: virtual teaming, communication, decision making, simulation

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The team movement has swept the corporate and business world. One cannot pick up a newspaper, current periodical, or textbook without a mention of teams. Teaming and self-directed work teams have become buzzwords. Teams provide the key to move organizations into the next century. The organizations of the twenty-first century will be made up of virtual teams and networks of teams. By 2005, more organizations will integrate multi-location work with new ways of conducting collaborative work in both electronic and physical spaces (Frankel, 2001). The network, not the pyramid, will become the conceptual model for how people work to achieve goals (Lipnack & Stamps, 1999).

As organizations become more global in their business interactions, virtual teaming will become the standard mode of operation. Unlike conventional teams, a virtual team works across space, time, and organizational boundaries with links strengthened by webs of communication technologies (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997). As can be noted, the primary difference between a team and a virtual team involves the dimension of physical space or distance between team members. This distance significantly affects the way team members interact. The global expansion of electronic connections, particularly the new digital media, provides the link for virtual team members to interact. In all other ways, virtual teams emulate traditional teams.

As companies enter the twenty-first century, they will need to adopt new ways of working to stay competitive. As more organizations become international, customers, partners, and resources will be spread around the world. Traditional face-to-face meetings will no longer be workable where most of the work force is constantly on the move.

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When team members are not physically located together, they must rely on technology to communicate. In addition, international work compounds and challenges the communication process by having employees scattered across the globe. For a virtual team to be successful, an organization will need to proactively stimulate the individual and team behaviors that will lead to success.

In the past, people have thought that teams needed to meet face to face to discuss issues and resolve problems, but in a number of functions, virtual teams have outperformed face-to-face teams. In fact, research studies have indicated that geographically dispersed teams can often work as effectively as co-located. (Savage, 1996). For example, research has shown that virtual teams using groupware generate more ideas in brainstorming sessions than the same participants working face to face. Virtual team interaction especially using e-mail or electronic chat appears to be an effective means of reducing various kinds of discrimination within the team. With visual stimuli removed, individuals focus more on content and less on the person generating the content (Willmore, 2000).

Therefore, in today's world of multimedia access, the assumption that teams must meet face to face to be successful seems incorrect. In fact, virtual teams rarely meet face to face and are supported by technology to collaborate (Lurey, 1998). Often, these teams can be set up as temporary structures existing to accomplish a particular task, however, some virtual teams serve as permanent teams that address ongoing organizational issues.

Students need to be educated about this new type of team and the communication tools available to facilitate communication and to enhance productivity. Leading companies are enjoying competitive advantages and greater profits through virtual teams,

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thereby providing the best job security for their employees. Therefore, students need to experience virtual teaming. If they have not at least simulated a virtual teaming experience, they may find it difficult to describe.

In the following paragraphs, I will present a highly interactive, hands-on experience that will allow students to experience working in virtual teams. The simulation will help students learn how to communicate and to work with other virtual teams without having face-to-face meetings. They will experience how virtual teams process information, begin to build trust, and handle task and maintenance roles.

Introducing the Simulation

The professor begins the simulation by explaining that the purpose is to create a situation in which the only way that the virtual teams can communicate with one another is through e-mail or in an on-line chat room. If students do not have access to computers, they can create handwritten notes and then post them to a centralized bulletin board. The key is to allow no face-to-face interaction among the virtual teams.

If the class does not have established work groups, the first task will be to divide the class into virtual teams. Once the virtual teams are formed, the professor tells the students that they will be playing assigned roles such as task, maintenance, or observer and will have specific directions to follow. The students should be told not share their assigned role with others, but to think about how they will play out their roles.

Then, the instructor should spend a few minutes clarifying the task, by stating something similar to this: "Today, we are going to simulate a virtual organization. You will only communicate face to face with your team. Interaction with other virtual teams will occur only in the chat room. Each virtual team will receive clues to solve a murder

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mystery. If all the teams put the facts together, you will be able to solve the mystery. You must find the murderer, the motive, the weapon, the time, and the location. Any time you think you know the answers and the entire virtual organization (the class) agrees, you may post your answers in the chat room. I will respond back by telling you whether all five answers are right or wrong. If any part of your answer is incorrect, I will not tell you which part is wrong."

The orientation phase ends by instructing the teams that once the simulation begins, they may not leave their assigned locations and that they will have 30 minutes to solve the mystery. Before sending the teams to their designated areas, the professor will give each team an envelope with some clues related to the murder mystery and give each team member a guide sheet with his or her assigned role. The instructor should take the opportunity to remind the teams that they may interact face to face with their team members while in their assigned area; however, all interaction with the other virtual teams must occur in the chat room.

During the Simulation

During the activity, the professor can keep track of the interaction occurring in the chat room and respond when or where appropriate. In addition, the professor should monitor the time to make sure the simulation does not exceed 30 minutes.

Once the correct solution is proposed, the professor should notify all teams that they have completed the simulation correctly and to begin their team debrief. At the conclusion of each team's debrief, the team observer should share what he or she observed. The professor should tell the teams that this portion of the exercise should take approximately 20 minutes.

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Following the Simulation

After the team debriefs, all the virtual teams come together to discuss their experience. The professor should begin this closing activity by encouraging the teams to share how they solved the mystery and what problems arose. If the class solved the mystery in less than 30 minutes, the professor should lead a discussion of why the virtual teams were successful in meeting their objective. If the teams did not complete the simulation in the allotted time, the instructor should help the teams discover where and why difficulties occurred. The instructor should make sure the discussion focuses on the skills needed to communicate and to make decisions effectively within a virtual team setting. The professor can use the following questions to lead this discussion:

How did the teams go about completing this task?

Did any conflict occur between team members or among virtual teams? If so, how was it handled?

How did the team encourage interaction with other virtual teams?

How did teams build trust with one another?

How did the lack of face-to-face interaction with the other virtual teams help or hinder the process?

If a face-to-face meeting with the other virtual teams would have helped, when should the meeting have occurred and what should have been discussed?

How will you take the lessons learned from this simulation back to work?

What are the three greatest lessons learned from this virtual teaming simulation?

Conclusion

Capitalizing on virtual teaming requires more than just investing in technology. Organizations must invest in educating individuals about this new type of team; and this simulation does just that. Once students have experienced virtual teaming, they will be ready to embrace it in their work place.

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This simulation was adapted from two exercises. One exercise entitled: Skill 3: Recognizing the Value of All Contributions from **Communication Games and Simulations** by Anita Covert and Gordon Thomas published by ERIC, 1978. The second exercise was entitled: Real Virtual published in the book: **Teamwork and Teamplay Games and Activities for Building and Training Teams** by Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan and Glenn Parker published by Josses-Bass Pfeiffer, 1999.

Appendix

Instructions to Share with the Class:

Your team will be receiving some clues for solving a murder mystery. If all the virtual teams put the facts together, the entire virtual organization will be able to solve the mystery. This simulation will allow you to:

- ✓ Work virtually with other virtual teams to solve a problem.
- ✓ Examine the barriers to trust in virtual teams.
- ✓ Develop effective communication strategies for virtual teams.
- ✓ Understand the importance of both task and maintenance roles within virtual teams.

The entire class must determine the murderer, the weapon, the time of the murder, the place of the murder, and the motive for the murder to complete this simulation. Each member of your virtual team will be assigned a specific role with instructions to follow. Once the simulation begins, you may not leave your assigned location. Your team may organize itself in any way you like, however, you may not pass your clues around to your team or to the other virtual teams. You may interact face-to-face with your team, but when communicating with other virtual teams, you must use the electronic chat room or e-mail. Any time the entire virtual organization thinks it knows the answers and all virtual teams come to an agreement, one designated team may post the solution. I will only tell whether all five answers are right or wrong. If any part of the answer is incorrect, I will not tell which part is incorrect.

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ANSWER: After receiving a superficial gunshot wound from Mr. Blackenton, Mr. Britt went to Mr. Roebuck's condominium where he was killed by Mr. Roebuck with a knife at 12:30 a.m. because Mr. Roebuck was in love with Mr. Britt's wife.

Clues

Instructions: Divide the clues equally according to number of virtual teams. Place clues in envelopes for each virtual team.

When he was discovered dead, Mr. Britt had a bullet hole in his thigh and a knife wound in his back.

Mr. Blackenton shot at an intruder in his condominium at 12:00 midnight.

The security guard at the condominium complex reported to police that he saw Mr. Britt at 12:15 a.m.

The bullet taken from Mr. Britt's thigh matched the gun owned by Mr. Blackenton.

Only one bullet had been fired from Mr. Blackenton's gun.

When the security guard saw Mr. Britt, Mr. Britt was bleeding slightly, but he did not seem too badly hurt.

A knife with Mr. Britt's blood on it was found in Miss May's yard.

The knife found in Miss May's yard had Mr. Roebuck's fingerprints on it.

Mr. Britt had destroyed Mr. Blackenton's computer business.

The security guard saw Mr. Britt's wife go to Mr. Roebuck's condominium at 11:30 p.m.

The security guard said that Mr. Britt's wife frequently left the building with Mr. Roebuck.

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Mr. Britt's body was found in the alley.

Mr. Britt's body was found at 1:30 a.m.

Mr. Britt had been dead for one hour when his body was found, according to a medical expert working with police.

The security guard saw Mr. Britt go to Mr. Roebuck's condominium at 12:25 a.m.

The security guard went off duty at 12:30 a.m.

It was obvious from the condition of Mr. Britt's body that it had been dragged a long distance.

Miss May saw Mr. Britt go to Mr. Blackenton's condominium building at 11:55 p.m.

Mr. Britt's wife disappeared after the murder.

Police were unable to locate Mr. Roebuck after the murder.

When police tried to locate Mr. Blackenton after the murder, they discovered that he had disappeared.

The security guard said that Miss May was in the entryway of the building when he went off duty.

Miss May often followed Mr. Britt.

Mr. Blackenton had threated Mr. Britt that he was going to kill him

Miss May said that nobody left the condominium complex between 12:25 a.m. and 12:45 a.m.

Mr. Britt's bloodstains were found in Mr. Roebuck's car.

Mr. Britt's bloodstains were found on the carpet in the hall outside Mr. Blackenton's condominium.

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Task Role Instruction Guide

You will focus on solving the murder mystery and completing this project on time. While you know building effective relationships is important to the successful completion of a task, you believe the time limitations and the complexity of the task mean that the team cannot do anything except "get the job done". Do what you can to carry out this role, and stay in your role throughout the activity. Do not show your assigned role card to your teammates.

Maintenance Role Instruction Guide

You will focus on building trusting relationships with other virtual teams. While you know that each team will be judged primarily on how quickly and correctly, they complete the assignment, you believe that people will not share information and work together unless they get to know and trust one another first. Do what you can to carry out your role, and stay in your role throughout the activity. Do not show your assigned role card to your teammates.

Observer Role Instruction Guide

You will observe the group dynamics of your team and provide feedback on how well they worked together. You will not participate in solving the murder mystery, but will take notes and report your observations at the conclusion of the simulation. Make sure to record observations that helped or hindered the team to complete its task. Focus specifically on the following:

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Did the group take some time to clarify the task, establish a process, or just jump right in to solve the mystery?

What task behaviors did you observe? How did these help or hinder the team?

What maintenance behaviors did you observe? How did these help or hinder the team?

Did all members of the team participate?

Did people feel free to say what was really on their minds?

When a team member presented an idea, did team members evaluate it, explore it further, or drop it?

How did you feel about your role? Did you want to do more than just observe?

Team Debriefing Guide

Each individual team member should answer the questions below and then share their answers with the whole team.

How did I help the team to work more effectively with the other virtual teams?

How might I have hindered the team's work with the other virtual teams?

How did the virtual teams decide to approach this task and did you perceive this to be an effective plan?

Do you perceive that the virtual teams worked together well? Why or why not?

Did you feel conflict arose?

If you were given the opportunity to work virtually with other virtual teams, what would you do differently?

What did you learn about communication and decision-making among virtual teams?

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